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March 18, 2005

TO: Supervisor Gloria Molina, Chair
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FROM: Thomas L. Garthwaite, M.D. *Thomas L. Garthwaite*
Director of Health Services
Marvin J. Southard, D.S.M. *Susan Kerr for*
Director of Mental Health

Colonel Joseph N. Smith *Joseph N. Smith*
Director of Military and Veterans Affairs

SUBJECT: **FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IMPROVING ACCESS AND
AVAILABILITY TO THE ESSENTIAL SERVICES FOR THE MEN AND WOMEN
OF THE ARMED FORCES**

In response to your January 4, 2005 request to the Directors of the Departments of Mental Health (DMH), Health Services (DHS) and Military and Veterans Affairs to examine the mental health needs of the County's veteran population and the mental health services available, we are providing you with findings regarding current status and recommendations for improving access and availability to these essential mental health services for the men and women of the armed forces, particularly those returning from combat in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Mental Health Needs and Services Available to County's Veteran Population

Approximately 5,000 active duty military personnel, national guard personnel and reservists, who are residents of Los Angeles County, were deployed and returned from combat in Afghanistan and Iraq during the previous two-year period. General estimates assume that about sixteen percent of veterans returning from combat suffer from varying degrees of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). The Veterans Administration (VA) offers two years post service medical benefits at no cost to all returning combat veterans for conditions related to military service and future care consistent with their eligibility.

According to the Veterans Integrated Service Network #22 which serves veterans in Los Angeles County, there is currently sufficient service capacity for veterans seeking mental health treatment. However, survey results and demographic data suggest that many veterans suffering from major depression, generalized anxiety or PTSD, particularly those returning from Afghanistan and Iraq, do not seek treatment. The main reasons for this appear to be the existing stigma attached to mental illness and the fact that these veterans do not want their health records to reflect that they have received any kind of mental health treatment.

The U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs (VA) provides an extensive array of services for veterans suffering from PTSD and other mental illnesses at Medical Centers, Community Clinics and Vet Centers throughout Los Angeles County. Their service continuum of care stretches from emergency treatment to supported employment. VA Greater Los Angeles Healthcare System (GLA) alone provided mental health services to almost 20,000 veterans in 2004, making it the largest mental health program within the Veterans Health Administration. Specifically, VA operates a number of psychiatric inpatient programs at their Medical Centers in West Los Angeles, Long Beach and Loma Linda with over 200 beds, including Psychiatric Intensive, Dual Diagnosis, General Acute Psychiatric, General Intermediate Psychiatric, and Medical and Geriatric Psychiatric care. The VA outpatient programs include Outpatient Mental Health Clinics, PTSD, Substance Abuse Recovery, Intensive Case Management, Day Treatment and Rehabilitative Psychiatry programs. Additionally an array of Community Care programs is available to veterans, which includes housing and vocational services. Vet Centers also provide mental health services to veterans and their families in a community clinic setting.

The recommendations presented in this report have been developed with the intent of addressing the stigma associated with seeking treatment for mental illness and veterans' fears of having mental health treatment indicated on their military records, so that they would more readily avail themselves of the array of services described above.

Recommendations for Improving Access and Availability of Mental Health Services to County's Veteran Population, particularly Veterans returning from combat in Iraq and Afghanistan

To address the mental health service needs for combat veterans returning from service, particularly veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan, and to overcome the issue of stigma, which keeps a number of these veterans from seeking out the services available through the VA, the Departments are recommending the following strategies:

1. A "Welcome Home" website specifically targeted to veterans returning from combat, will be developed by the County and serve the following purposes:
 - a. Education on relevant topics, including PTSD and other common mental health issues, and medical and mental health benefits for veterans returning from combat;
 - b. Information on available services and programs at the VA and other County and community organizations. Information on health care, jobs, and housing could be included to gain a wider audience;
 - c. Provision of interactive and supportive online programs, such as chat-rooms for veterans returning from combat in Iraq and Afghanistan;
 - d. E-mail notification for persons willing to leave their e-mail addresses and who are interested in learning about special community events and town hall meetings that deal with mental health support for the returning veterans.

- e. Links to VA national and local resources for information addressing the specific needs of returning combat veterans as well as general benefits.

The Departments are proposing that the publication of and link to this website be on the County of Los Angeles' home page. The Los Angeles County Department of Military and Veteran Affairs has agreed to set up and maintain the proposed website and will be working with the Chief Administrative Office to identify the necessary resources.

One important benefit of providing educational and informational services for veterans returning from combat and their families via the Internet is the high degree of anonymity. Given the stigma veterans often face or fear when acknowledging mental health problems, the anonymity of the website would enable them to learn about available benefits and services while assuring their confidentiality.

- 2. A Fact Sheet that will be developed by the three Departments and distributed to all mental health service providers, both contracted and directly operated, within the Departments of Health Services and Mental Health. The Fact Sheet would also be available to the DMH Access Center (a 24/7 crisis and referral service), which alone receives between 21,000 and 25,000 calls per month from persons inquiring about available mental health services.

The Fact Sheet will serve to inform and prepare Access Center and front line agency staff in three main ways:

- a. Stress the need to identify patients/clients who are combat veterans seeking mental health services;
- b. Educate staff regarding eligibility of combat veterans to access medical and mental health services within the VA; and
- c. Provide staff with referral information regarding existing mental health resources and programs for combat veterans including program addresses, phone numbers and points of contact.

The Fact Sheet will be an important tool to raise awareness of the issues and service needs of combat veterans, particularly those returning from Iraq and Afghanistan and to assist staff to make appropriate referrals to the VA services available to the men and women of the armed forces.

The Departments look forward to implementing the proposed programs with the support of your Board.

TLG:rs
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- c: Chief Administrative Officer
County Counsel
Executive Officer, Board of Supervisors